

El Greco

El Greco, as Domenikos Theotokopuli, b. Candia, Crete, 1541, d. 1614, was known in Spain, was the most outstanding painter of the Spanish school in the 16th century. Factual details of his youth and artistic training are extremely scanty. He was probably first apprenticed as a painter of religious pictures in the Greco-Byzantine tradition. Crete was a dependency of Venice, and the young artist undoubtedly emigrated to the Italian city for further study.

In 1570 he seems to have arrived in Rome, introduced as a pupil of the Venetian master TITIAN, and he entered the Roman painters' guild in September 1572. It is reported that during the pontificate of Pius V (1566-72) El Greco, by offering to repaint Michelangelo's Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel, made himself unpopular in Rome and was obliged to move to Spain. Whatever the length of El Greco's stay in Italy, he was clearly influenced by the sensuous colorism of Titian, the realism of Jacopo Bassano (see BASSANO family), the spiritualized figural style of MICHELANGELO, and particularly by the dramatic energy and compositional complexity of TINTORETTO.

El Greco arrived in Toledo from Madrid in 1577 to undertake an important series of religious paintings, The Disrobing of Christ (1577-79; Toledo Cathedral). In 1580-82 he painted The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice for King Philip II's immense palace-monastery of the Escorial. The painting failed to please the king, however, further encouraging El Greco to remain settled permanently in Toledo, where the numerous religious foundations provided a steady source of commissions. Financial difficulties seem to have forced the artist into intensive productivity, aided by studio assistants, usually resulting in several versions of each major composition.

In Toledo, El Greco gradually moved away from a relatively naturalistic style derived from the Venetian Renaissance to one involving antinaturalistic elongation of figures, flickering light, and intense colors, as in The Burial of the Conde de Orgaz (1586; Santo Tome, Toledo), and finally to the visionary expressionism and extreme abstraction of forms seen in The Agony in the Garden (c.1597-1603; Toledo Museum, Ohio). Some of his finest pictures of saints, such as Saint Louis (c.1587-97; Louvre, Paris), have an intense, portraitlike quality balanced between realism and stylization. In addition to his religious works, El Greco produced many portraits of extraordinary psychological penetration, such as Cardinal-Inquisitor Fernando Nino de Guevara (c.1600; Metropolitan Museum, New York City); mythological subjects like the Laocoon (c.1608-14; National Gallery, Washington, D.C.); and visionary landscapes, which are represented by his views of Toledo (c.1595-1614; Metropolitan Museum and the Greco Museum, Toledo). El Greco was also an accomplished sculptor and designed architectural settings for two altarpieces made in 1577.

The intense emotionalism and spirituality of El Greco's art marks him as one of the last and greatest inheritors of the 16th-century international Mannerist style (see MANNERISM). His mysticism was ideally suited to the fervent religious climate of Counter-Reformation Toledo, but his style was not easily transmitted, and he had no important followers. Soon after his death Spain was to move toward a more sober and down-to-earth art influenced by the Italian baroque realist CARAVAGGIO.

The art of El Greco was neglected for three centuries, until the artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with their interest in distortion and abstraction of form and in emotional expressionism, restored the painter's reputation as one of Spain's leading masters.

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